

Tiktok and Gen Z Slang: The Functions and Its Effects on English Language Proficiency

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ABSTRACT

The widespread use of social media platforms has significantly influenced the way Gen Z communicates, specifically new slang expressions. The focus of this study was to determine the functions of TikTok-derived Gen Z slang and its impact on the English language proficiency of LG240 students in Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Shah Alam. The research aimed to find out which of the slang terms were more commonly used based on Callahan's Generation Z Dictionary (Lihawa et al., 2021) and to investigate the functions of Gen Z slang in students' daily communication based on the theory of Allan and Burridge (2006). Therefore, a mixed method approach was used in this study. The quantitative data from the questionnaires were complemented with qualitative content analysis to elicit rich data. The findings indicated that Gen Z slang can be used as a powerful tool for casual and expressive communication. It was recommended that future research should also be extended to establish how the utilisation of Gen Z slang affected the professional writing proficiency of university students, especially in internship, employment application, and organisational interactions, because it could also establish the perception of employers and the possibility of the need for remedial training to reduce communication gaps.

Keywords: English language proficiency, Gen Z slang, language function, Tiktok communication

INTRODUCTION

To begin with, the shift of language transformation through digital platforms has significantly influenced how younger generations communicate. For example, TikTok plays an important role in influencing users' identities, values, and communication styles through its algorithm-driven content (Thurlow, 2011). Furthermore, as language naturally changes across generations, new words are being created, borrowed, and adapted as time goes by (Martini, 2015). She added that TikTok has become a major driver in spreading new slang expressions. Due to this, this phenomenon is especially prominent among Gen Z, who are leading the changes in language use.

However, Coleman (2012) argued that the growing use of social media slang has raised concerns about its influence on standard language mastery, especially in academic settings. Moreover, Gen Z students tend to switch between informal slang and standard English, thus this has affected their language proficiency (Tagg, 2015; Hajare, 2023). On the other hand, Crystal (2008) claimed that previous studies have found that the use of social media slang can help to reduce grammatical complexity and vocabulary depth, which are considered important in academic writing and professional communication. Despite these concerns, study that focusing on how Gen Z slang impacts university students in Malaysia is still limited especially for those studying language and communication. Thus, by focusing on this specific group, this study will provide insights into how digital language trends influence English proficiency in a university context.

Research Questions

1. What are the most commonly used slang terms and expressions among LG240 students on TikTok?
2. What are the functions of the Gen Z slang LG240 in students' daily communication?
3. To what extent does Gen Z slang affect English language proficiency among LG240 students?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Allan and Burridge Theory (2006)

The researcher employed a theory by Allan and Burridge (2006) in this study. The theory explains slang and its various functions in language. According to Allan and Burridge (2006), one could classify slang based on certain categories which are meant to perform particular roles within communication. Hence, this theory is useful for this study as it gives an idea of how people communicate informally depending on their environment. The researcher focused on identifying and describing the types of slang used by this group, in line with Allan and Burridge's theory (2006).

In this study, slang is defined as informal language that varies from standard pronunciation and grammar, and it happens due to technology and social interaction (Allan & Burridge, 2006). As stated before, slang exists because of technology advancement tied with human sociality. Besides that, they added that slang also serves several functions, such as making conversations more casual, expressing closeness, and adding humour or sarcasm. These functions help to explain in what way does Gen Z expresses identity and interacts socially. The study categorises slang into a few types such as acronyms, flippant expressions, imitation words, clipping, and creative innovations, and analyses how each type is used in communication. Furthermore, the theory highlights the importance of context in using slang. Slang is not just a set of words but also reflects cultural and social identity (Puspita & Ardianto, 2024). Thus, by examining Gen Z's interactions on TikTok, the study shows how slang helps build relationships and identity (Allan & Burridge, 2006). Overall, this framework helps explain both the linguistic and social aspects of slang use among Gen Z in today's digital world.

Slang Semantic

According to Karla (2022), semantic shift is the change in the meaning of a word through some period. Not to mention, slang definitions can also disappear, grow, or move around among different groups. Fairclough's (2013) theory of language as social practice supports this that language is shaped by cultural and social contexts. For instance, platforms' slangs like those available at Tiktok have led to significant semantic shifts since the users give the words new connotations depending on how they are being used. Patterns of communication between users online can best be explained by an approach called Semantics Analysis of Slang (SAOS). An example of this kind of shift from its primary connotation is the term 'cap', which originally meant a hat while now being commonly referred to among Gen Z as a Lie or something that is not true.

Past Studies

Tufail et al. (2024) studied the types and functions of Gen Z slang on social media platforms, such as Instagram and WhatsApp, by examining the chats of 30 university students in Pakistan. The study identified five major types of slang: acronyms, imitative slang, flippant expressions, fresh or creative slang, and clipping. The findings revealed that acronyms were the most popular, demonstrating Gen Z's desire for quick and effective communication, and clipping was the least popular. Hence, the results showed that slang is important in expressing identity and that digital platforms have an impact on how we use language.

Syafa'ah and Haryanto (2023) also revealed that the slang in TikTok was often used by Gen Z, especially "fresh" and "creative" expressions were the most popular. In addition, they added that most respondents use it regularly since they are often applied for informal greetings, conveying feelings, and creating an impression of intimacy. Thus, Gen Z slang plays an important role in social media, which connects some people but excludes others from online interactions. Therefore, this study aims at identifying the most common slang being used amongst Gen Z and analysing its role in their everyday interactions through the theory by Allan & Burridge (2006).

METHODOLOGY

The researcher employed a mixed-method approach. This research was conducted to investigate the types of slang used by LG240 students on TikTok, understand their reasons for using slang, and examine its impact on English language proficiency. Qualitative data were collected through content analysis of TikTok captions and comments, while quantitative data were gathered using a questionnaire adapted from Widiastuti (2021). The slang terms were then classified into four categories: trendy words, acronyms, imitative words, and clippings.

The study was conducted among 30 LG240 students from UiTM Shah Alam, selected through purposive sampling, focusing on frequent users of slang in TikTok. The primary research tools were an observation protocol and a questionnaire. The observation focused on identifying and documenting the use of slang in TikTok posts, based on the theory of Allan and Burrige (2006). Meanwhile, the questionnaire was adapted from Widiastuti (2021) consisted of four sections covering commonly used slang, its functions, and its impact on language proficiency. The researcher distributed a questionnaire in order to collect 30 respondents' opinions about the topic. All the participants provided their consent as per ethical guidelines during data collection by keeping all their identities confidential (Ponto, 2015). Then, the researcher analysed the content using thematic analysis to explore the language data and find out meaningful patterns from the collected information. As for the questionnaire, descriptive analyses were used through statistical analysis (SPSS) to describe the outcomes. These processes enabled the researcher to have concrete conclusions about the varieties, functionalities of slangs, and their influences on communication.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

What are the most commonly used slang terms and expressions among LG240 students on TikTok?

Table 1: Type of Slang Term Commonly Used Among Respondents on TikTok

Participants	Gen Z Slang Used	Type of Slang	Example of Usage
P1	FTW (For The Win)	Acronyms	"Mandi perfume FTW"
	FYP (For You Page)	Acronyms	"When in doubt, wear pink #FYP!"
	Imma (I'm going to)	Imitative	"Imma wear this colour more often now!"
P2	IB (Inspired By)	Acronyms	"Karina eye-look inpo! Transition IB: @nici"
	DC (Dance Credit)	Acronyms	"DC: @ines"
	OOTD (Outfit Of The Day)	Acronyms	"OOTD concert transition!"
P3	BRB (Be Right Back)	Acronyms	"brb"
P4	GF (Girlfriend)	Acronyms	"me and my gf :3"
	Pics (Pictures)	Clippings	"some pics I took :3"
P5	Recap (Recapitulate)	Clippings	"2024 recap"
P6	Lowkey	Trendy/Fresh Words	"lowkey hoping for a better one next year"
P7	Lesgaurr (Let's go)	Imitative	"Next year lesgaurr"
P8	Face Card	Trendy/Fresh Words	"Face card didn't decline today"
P9	Slay	Trendy/Fresh Words	"slay gila!!!"

To analyse the commonly used slang terms and expressions popular among LG240 students, a qualitative method was used. Table 1 above are the 9 TikTok usernames that are active in posting videos with Gen Z slang captions on TikTok platform.

Table 2: Types and Occurrences of Slang used by 9 Respondents

No.	Types	Occurrences
1.	Fresh/Trendy Words	3
2.	Acronyms	7

3.	Imitative	2
4.	Clippings	2
	Total	14

Table 2 shows that TikTok users commonly use four types of Gen Z slang, with acronyms being the most preferable type, followed by trendy or fresh words, imitative and lastly clippings. Slang such as *FTW*, *FYP*, *IB*, and *OOTD* highlight the preference for short and efficient communication, while terms like *imma* and *lesgaurr* reflect casual, spoken language. Clipped words like *pics* and *recap* simplify longer terms, and trendy expressions like *lowkey*, *slay*, and *face card* show the influence of current online culture. Overall, the data indicates that slang on TikTok is highly informal and strongly shaped by trends and social interaction.

What are the functions of the Gen Z slang LG240 in students' daily communication?

As stated in Table 1, the findings highlight the dynamic and versatile nature of slang, shedding light on its functions, contextual appropriateness, and impact on group dynamics.

To elaborate, the study found that acronyms account for half of the slang types. These include instances such as '*Mandi perfume FTW*' and '*OOTD concert transition!*' Acronyms are significant because they showcase the effect of digital platforms on how people utilise languages. This is because acronyms help individuals express ideas briefly and efficiently considering constraints imposed by limited characters and interactions in today's fast-paced environment. According to Forda et al., (2023): 'It is necessary to maintain brevity and clarity in the process of communicating digitally that demands the creation and popularisation of acronyms.' It means that acronyms have become an important part of life among social media users who navigate dynamic online spaces daily.

Secondly, slangs consisted mainly of clippings, which indicate their relevance as a form of communication. The respondents mostly utilised clippings as a mode of conveying information briefly and specifically. In fact, the term *recap* (to recapitulate) is quite a common one since many participants applied it for summarising essential points. Similarly, *pics* refer to pictures and other similar terms. To explain this, Karlya (2022) indicates, clippings arise from our natural linguistic urge to shorten long expressions. They tend to be widely used across informal and digital settings. Hence, the frequent usage of clippings can be attributed to the widespread influence of digital platforms over our language.

Lastly, imitative slang, accounting for 12% of the terms, represents another significant category. This includes terms like "*imma*" (I'm going to), "*lesgaurr*" (let's go) mirrored spoken language and reflects how informal speech patterns are translated into text. According to Eble (1996), imitative slang reflects the natural evolution of language as speakers adapt spoken forms for digital communication, fostering relatability and authenticity in informal contexts.

To what extent does Gen Z slang affect English language proficiency among LG240 students?

The analysis of the final section of the questionnaire focused on examining the impact of Gen Z slang on the English language proficiency of LG240 students. A total of 10 statements were distributed to 30 respondents using a 5-point Likert scale.

Table 3: How Gen Z slang impacts the English language proficiency of LG240 students

ITEMS	PERCENTAGE OF AGREE	NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS
1. Using Gen Z slang has improved my ability to express myself creatively.	70%	21
2. Gen Z slang helps me to communicate more effectively with my peers.	83.3%	25
3. Gen Z slang usage has expanded my overall English vocabulary.	56.7%	17

4. Gen Z slang makes communication quicker and more efficient for me.	76.7%	23
5. Learning new slang terms motivates me to explore the meanings of English words.	80%	24
6. Gen Z Slang has negatively affected my grammar skills.	16.7%	5
7. The frequent use of Gen Z Slang has reduced my ability to write formal English.	36.7%	11
8. I find it difficult to transition from using slang to formal English in academic or professional settings.	16.7%	5
9. Excessive use of slang has made me less confident in formal English communication.	16.7%	5
10. The use of Gen Z Slang has both positive and negative effects on my English language proficiency.	60%	18

The results show that a majority of students perceive Gen Z slang positively, especially in terms of communication and creativity. A high percentage of respondents agreed that slang helps them communicate more effectively with peers (83.3%, 25 students) and makes communication quicker and more efficient (76.7%, 23 students). This is aligned with Eble (1996) who stated that slang helps young people communicate better with their friends. Not to mention, Barton and Lee (2013) claimed that students develop greater word meaning understanding when they study new slang which helps to build their interest in language and their ability to adjust linguistically. Thus, studying a new pattern of language not only broadens vocabulary but also encourages them to think about structures and cultural influences.

Additionally, 80% (24 students) reported that learning slang motivates them to explore English meanings, while 70% (21 students) agreed that it improves creative self-expression. These findings suggest that slang plays an important role in enhancing informal communication and engagement with language. According to Crystal (2008), slang develops to create simpler language forms that also offer concise expressions especially on the fast-paced digital platform like TikTok, where creativity is essential. This illustrates how slang serves as a tool for efficient yet impactful communication.

In terms of language development, more than half of the respondents (56.7%, 17 students) agreed that slang has expanded their vocabulary. This indicates that, despite being informal, slang may still contribute positively to vocabulary growth. However, students show mixed perceptions regarding its overall impact, as 60% (18 students) acknowledged that slang has both positive and negative effects on their English proficiency. This aligns with the theory of Allan and Burridge (2006) that slang introduces innovative linguistic elements, enriching the user's lexicon and enhancing their capacity to navigate diverse communication contexts. Such enrichment can foster a sense of linguistic inclusivity, particularly in informal settings, where slang often functions as a marker of in-group identity and belonging (Eble, 1996). On the other hand, the negative effects of slang appear less prominent. Only 16.7% (5 students) agreed that slang negatively affects their grammar, makes them less confident in formal communication, or causes difficulty in switching to formal English. However, a slightly higher percentage (36.7%, 11 students) believed that frequent slang use reduces their ability to write in formal English. This suggests that while most students are aware of appropriate language use, some may still face challenges in formal writing contexts.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Gen Z slang, therefore, remains a dynamic and multifaceted mode of communication which not only represents but also contributes to current cultural trends and linguistic innovations. As such, employing Gen Z slang

encourages enhanced creativity, expression, and group dynamics as well as enriches their English lexicon. Nevertheless, due to its informal nature, there should be an effort to navigate its usage effectively for possible negative impacts on the grammar and formal writings, as evidenced by Allan and Burridge's (2006) and Crystal's (2003) theories.

While there are many benefits as discussed above, the usage has some issues too. Due to the fact that Gen Z slang is quite an informal, it could lead to users' misunderstanding of suitable languages that can be used in various contexts. When students rely heavily on such slang words and phrases while communicating with others, they might unconsciously use those terms during their academic writing, professional communication, or other types of formal presentation. Hence, using this kind of expression would impact their grammar accuracy, and vocabulary choices, thus influences their formality level in different kinds of written communications.

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